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## ENGLAND AND SOCIALISM.

BY BRITANNICUS.

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THE *London Times* has recently been publishing some very able and candid articles on the Socialist movement in Great Britain. The series has been less an examination of Socialist tenets than a description, and an extremely interesting one, of the various bodies formed to popularize them—their numbers, strength, propaganda, the pamphlets and newspapers they publish, their lectures, peripatetic vans and street-corner meetings, their successes in electing representatives to seats on local councils and in Parliament, the differences in their respective programmes, the moneys they dispose of; in short the whole machinery of the Socialist campaign. The impression left by the articles is unquestionably that of a large, active, enthusiastic and increasingly successful agitation devoted to Socialist aims. But though they have been widely read and have revealed much that was either unknown or unrealized before, I notice that there has been little or nothing in the nature of a Socialist scare. People have taken them quietly and have passed on to other things.

A year ago their reception would have been very different. A year ago Great Britain was in quite a hubbub over Socialism. It would have made a Frenchman or a German smile to see the avidity with which the ancient formulæ and catchwords, long chewed to death on the Continent, were being handed around in England. The papers were filled with letters and articles on this and that plank in the supposed Socialism platform. No other subject figured so prominently in the speeches of the politicians. Leagues for defending the middle class against an uprising from below, leagues for the protection of property, sprang on every side into merry life. Grave journals were exhorting us to rally round our religion, our hearths, our possessions, our

families, the throne and the marriage tie; and dukes went about denouncing Socialism as "the vilest of political creeds," "a programme of undiluted atheism, theft and immorality." For the first time the Socialists were getting something like a national audience. For the first time Englishmen heard themselves addressed as "comrades." They were beginning even on the tops of omnibuses to talk with quite a knowing air about "collectivism" and "individualism" and the "State" and what with the Unionists alternately denouncing the Socialists and angling for their votes, with the Liberals vehemently exculpating themselves from the charge of being the secret allies of Socialism, with the Labor men and the Trade Unionists repudiating the Socialists one day and embracing them the next, and with the Socialists themselves shouting their triumphant faith that "the Revolution" had at last arrived—it was no wonder that many nonsensical alarms found greedy acceptance and that the country, like a healthy man smitten with the first sudden symptoms of disease, began asking itself in amazed trepidation what had come over it and how it was all going to end.

But in the last fifteen months things have cooled down considerably, and it is easier now to estimate with some approach to rationality the chances of Socialism succeeding in such a country as England. A dispassionate observer would not, I think, rate them very highly. He would at once perceive that England possesses a dozen safeguards that are non-existent on the Continent, and that Socialism in England has to overcome obstacles the potency of which can scarcely be exaggerated. Among those obstacles the greatest and most permanent is the British national character. As people we dislike large views and suspect short cuts, in politics especially. Our genius for compromise may be merely another term for our genius for stupidity, but it is a great and fundamental fact nevertheless, and it has served us well. We are blessed with a stubborn insensibility to ideas. They do not fire us, they do not even irritate us, we simply ignore them. Our work and our instincts are altogether concrete. Abstractions bore us. We have a pestilential habit of testing all arrangements and institutions by one unvarying formula. We do not ask what is the principle that lies behind them or the theory on which they are based, but simply, Do they work? That is the only kind of logic

we are acquainted with—the logic, not of ideas, but of experience. It is not at all a bad sort of failing. It has made our historical evolution a placid jog-trot down the middle of the road. It puts us on our guard at once against symmetrical Utopias, annihilating remedies and the political cure-all. It has made us, no doubt, too tolerant of abuses, but it has also enabled us to develop phase by phase a political and social system which alone in Europe has stood the test of centuries. We care nothing for dogmas and everything for their practical results, nothing for definitions and explanations and everything for facts. The thing that is absorbs us; the thing that may be just mildly interests us; on the thing that might be, and especially on the thing that ought to be, we can hardly be induced to waste a moment's thought.

I cannot, in short, imagine a people temperamentally more averse from Socialism or any other "ism." In France, where to be logical is to be statesmanlike, where speculative philosophies and grandiose ideas exercise an almost appalling fascination and are pushed home with inexorable precision, and where the notion prevails that all human affairs can be solved like a problem in algebra, I can well understand that the doctrines of Socialism find a wide acceptance. But in England they are at an almost grotesque disadvantage. We have been educated above them in one sense; we are not educated up to them in another. Every inherited instinct of moderation and "practicality" and of preference for the great thing over the great name, leads us to fight shy of Socialism as a visionary and untried perhaps; while to the idealism that inspires it we are totally inaccessible. That we are capable of idealism we have shown often enough, but always in relation to some specific and immediate issue.

Again, the tradition of individualism is still strong among us. It is not so strong as it was; it weakens in proportion to the increasing sensitiveness of the State to evils that in the past were comfortably ignored; but it is even now a more powerful bulwark than any European people, or indeed any people at all except the Americans, have to offer to Socialism. We have next to none of the paternalism that is bred in the bones of the Latin communities and that has been drilled into the consciousness of the Germans. Our instinct is always to cut free from

the State instead of leaning on it. We tolerate officialdom, but are very far from reverencing it. We make use of the functionary as a convenient utility, but we do not envy him. The moment Englishmen realize that Socialism is, in effect, the Inquisition in a civic mask they will have nothing to do with it.

The motive-power behind theoretical Socialism, Socialism in the abstract, as one sees it on the Continent, is the longing for a transformed and equitable society. But the motive-power behind Socialism in practice is apt to be mere greed for worldly ease and comforts expressing itself through the media of class consciousness and class hatred. We in England have always been remarkably free from the class-spirit in this form. It has flared for a moment through our tranquil history—at the time of the Reform Bill, for instance, and again during the Chartist struggle—but it has never been, nor is it now, an accepted condition of our social structure. There is, indeed, no European country in which the rungs on the social ladder are so near together or so easily ascended. There are no rigid barriers anywhere, no insurmountable obstacles; the gradients are easy, the approaches open, and the lines between class and class have lost all precision and are wavering and faint almost to the point of obliteration. Class has never been pitted against class in these islands on a scale in any sense comparable to the internecine struggles of the Continent. We have never had our French Revolution. The very alphabet of the class warfare is a foreign tongue to us. Aristocracy, the middle class, the working class, are phrases that suggest less than nothing of hatred or opposition. The “*bourgeoisie*” as the French use the word has no meaning for us, and no equivalent either in our language or our conditions. Neither has the “*proletariat*.” Nothing could better illustrate the absence of class consciousness among us than that we are obliged to have recourse to some such clumsy expedients as “*rich*” and “*poor*” to express our social divisions.

Thus the state of mind in which the propaganda of Socialism finds its readiest response is in England all but non-existent. History has not left it to us as a legacy, and I doubt whether it will be easy to manufacture it by agitation. Compared with most nations, we are miraculously free from provocations to social strife. We have no military caste lording it over the un-uni-

formed masses and expressing in tone and bearing and conduct its privileged contempt for all civilians. We have no conscription either to discipline or to sour the spirit of our youth. We have no Protection to set town against country and the favored few against the unorganized many. Some strongholds of political privilege still remain to be captured, but their existence and their activities supply none of the fuel for a class conflagration. I am very far from thinking England an ideal country, but I do not know any land where property has been less arrogant and more mindful of its duties, where the sense of social or economic injustice is so weak and restricted, where the various elements in the national structure are more conscious of their interdependence and more animated by a mutual helpfulness, where the abuses of capital have been more wisely restrained by legislation, where political grievances and exasperations are so few and trivial, and where the work of social reform has on the whole gone on so continuously. In Germany where the spirit and privileges of caste display themselves daily in the Administration, in the courts of law, in the army, in the political ascendancy of a small stiff-necked clique, and, above all, in the attitude of the average employer towards his employees; in France where the national genius for humanitarianism delights to escape from realities into the clouds—no one seriously thinks that France, a land of peasant proprietors, will ever do anything more momentous than toy with the idea of collectivism; in the United States, where capital is vicious and unrestrained either by law or sentiment, where the black-list and government by injunction and Pinkertons flourish, where factory legislation is still in embryo, and where there is one law for the protection of life to a thousand for the protection of property—in these countries Socialists find a set of conditions far more favorable to their propaganda than any they can hope to discover in England.

Socialism, once more, makes most headway in countries where the political instinct is weakest. This may be, but I do not think it is, a coincidence. It is in any case a fact, and a fact which should comfort the alarmists in England. For in no country is the political instinct more highly developed and nowhere has experience in the workings of Parliamentary institutions been so prolonged and intimate. Continental analogies seem to me in this respect almost wholly misleading. Because Socialism has very

largely killed the Liberal movement in Germany and Italy, and to some extent in France, it by no means follows that it is going to be equally successful in England. British Liberalism is immeasurably better equipped for self-protection than were ever the timid doctrinaires who assumed its insignia on the Continent. It has a great tradition as one of the governing forces of the country. It has the prestige of problems faced and solved, of high responsibilities splendidly borne, of far-reaching reforms actually accomplished. Moreover, it is still a vital and cohesive body with an established organization behind it, an immense following among all classes of society, and a reasoned confidence that its mandate, so far from being exhausted, has just taken on a new and lengthy lease of life and power. It has never fallen into the hands of amateurs or rhetoricians; it has never got seriously out of touch with national sentiment; its work has been pre-eminently practical and positive; and it has been quick to respond to changing needs and to adjust itself without dislocation to new conditions. That a force so powerful, pliable, sensitive and sensible offers an obstacle to political Socialism such as it has encountered nowhere else must, I think, be very obvious.

But there is another and more immediate barrier in its path. On the Continent Socialism preceded Trade Unionism; in England it has tardily followed it. That is a most vital distinction. In France, for instance, it is the Socialist Party in the Chamber which has the traditions, the organized system and the balance, while the Trade Unions do what they can—it is not very much—to egg it into unpalatable extremes. In England the situation is precisely reversed, the Trade Unions being old, responsible and cautious organizations, while the Socialists by comparison have neither means nor numbers. Trade Unionism in England is essentially a restraining and conservative force directed towards tangible ends. The Socialists, it is true, have succeeded for the time being in capturing it. Although a small minority, they have contrived through their activity, through the political apathy of most Trade Unionists and their absorption in the industrial and provident sides of their organizations, in grafting themselves upon Trade Unionism to an extent that goes far beyond the wishes or intentions of the working classes. This I am convinced will become clearer as time goes on and the inevitable breach widens.

Nobody seriously doubts that, if the Trade Unionists were fairly polled on the direct issue, there would be an overwhelming majority not only against Socialism, but against any political alliance that enabled the Socialists to use the funds and prestige and organization of the Trade Unions for their propaganda. No one, again, seriously doubts that the working classes as a whole, with their enormous wealth invested in co-operative, friendly, building, provident and other societies, are dead against "the Socialization of the means of production, distribution and exchange."

It passes my comprehension how people who observe the difficulty of reform in England can assume the facility of revolution. They have only to look about them to realize the enormous resources which every vested interest can draw upon when it has to meet attack. Landlords, lawyers and the brewers represent less than a tithe of the resisting power which is at the disposal of property in these islands; yet every one knows what power they possess. The work of reform in England is always arduous and protracted, but never impossible. No interest, however wealthy or however well organized, can permanently withstand the public interest. The whole bent of our political institutions and of our national temperament is to make progress slow, gradual and intermittent, but absolutely sure. The result is a paradox thoroughly characteristic of England. Just as she built up an unexampled Empire without once mentioning the word "World-Politics," so, without a single Socialist in Parliament, with next to no talk of the logic and theory of the ideal State, with little examination of first principles or the ultimate drift of things, she has done more to further social reforms, to protect the interests of Labor, and to make the collective and individual freedom of her people a reality, than any country on earth. There is scarcely a practical project on the programme of Continental Socialism that is not already a commonplace and established fact in England. "After all," writes John Morley in his latest volume of "Miscellanies," "the more or less of State action is only one point in the contest. So far as that goes, what is curious is that England, where Socialism has as a body of doctrine been least in fashion, has in action carried Socialism in its protective and restrictive aspect further than most other countries . . . our progressive income-tax and death-duties with

their sliding scales—the State arbitrarily equalizing private fortunes by inequalities of public charge—involve an invasion of the rights of individual property, and therefore of individual liberty, that is up to now rejected both in the French Republic and in the American Republic, and that certainly would have made the men of 1789 and 1793 ‘stare and gasp.’” M. Jaurès and Herr Bebel, if they looked into our Factory Laws, the privileges of our Trade Unions, our Employers’ Liability Acts, our co-operators, the activities of our municipalities, and our wage clauses in public contracts, would be inclined, I suspect, to pronounce us Socialists without knowing it.

Nothing, finally, can be more obvious than that Socialism, which everywhere begins as a movement of revolution, everywhere ends as nothing more than a movement of advanced reform. There is not to-day a single country in which the Socialists are able to advocate the collective ownership of land with any hope of winning over the peasant proprietors; and it has been proved time and again that as a political force they are powerless when confronted by the old, elementary factors of race, religion or patriotism. This process of change to which Socialism like any other creed is subject can best, perhaps, be traced in Germany. There the Socialists have thrown overboard pretty nearly all the leading principles with which they started their political life. They are completely submitted to the Parliamentary system. They have tacitly abandoned the idea of an armed revolution by the masses or any other ushering in of the new era by a single cataclysmic stroke. They acknowledge in practice, if not in theory, the virtue of the gradual approach. They have ceased to war on religion. The *Klassenkampf* in its original form is no longer a weapon in their armory. They co-operate where formerly they banned. They seek to trim and train rather than to uproot. One by one, in fact, the abstractions of the Marxian faith have yielded to the dissolvent of tactical necessities and a wider and more exact knowledge. Ten years hence it is doubtful whether it will be possible to find in the German Reichstag a single Social Democrat who believes, as Marx believed, that the growth of capitalism implies the progressive pauperization of the masses, and that the “big farm” is bound to swallow up the little one. They have had to compromise and make terms with things as they are. Even the theory

of cosmopolitanism, which was inseparable from the original Socialist movement, has been given up. There is to-day an awakening consciousness that the future of Socialism depends on its acceptance of the idea and the responsibilities of nationality. What, in short, one observes in Germany, and indeed all over the Continent, is that the Socialists of to-day, instead of preaching upheaval and dispossession by force, are steadily concentrating upon the immediate work of material and moral betterment. In their heart of hearts they have accepted the proposition that a capitalist society will indefinitely continue, and have framed their programmes accordingly. Even, therefore, in countries where it finds a congenial soil for its propaganda, modern Socialism is far more Radical than revolutionary. And that the soil of England is not congenial, that England on the contrary is amply and uniquely barricaded against the onset of Socialism in any of its confiscatory guises, I have already suggested and tried to demonstrate.

BBITANNICUS.